DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 143 576 SO 010 245

AUTHOR Vartanian, Pershing
TITLE American Studies: A Problem in Academic Contra-Culture.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 16p.; Revision of a paper presented at Annual Meeting of the Western Social Science Association (Denver, Colorado, April 21-25, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Culture; American Literature; *American Studies; Course Content; Curriculum; Departments; Educational Change; *Foundations of Education; Higher Education; *Intellectual Disciplines; *Interdisciplinary Approach

ABSTRACT

Although the American studies movement has gained widespread popularity within its 50 years of existence, it is still devoid of any controlling assumptions, models, and coherence. The intellectual disarray which has recently characterized the movement has encouraged one group of scholars, the "reflexionists," to examine the causes of that disarray, state the problems which beset the movement, and recommend solutions. They seek a reconstruction in theory, method, and disciplinary goals in order to refashion the movement into American cultural studies. To understand the reflexionsts' concern about the movement's disciplinary core, one must see their activity as occuring within the context of an academic contra culture. A contra culture is a highly charged sociocultural entity which possesses both normative characteristics and the essential of conflict in its structure. The contra-cultural character of the American studies movement is embodied in the rhetoric about its origins, discipline, and methodclogy. Freedom from academic prohibitions and eagerness to collapse arbitrary disciplinary boundaries characterize the rhetoric. The aims of reflexionists are to refine the culture concept of the movement, restate its interdisciplinary basis in operational terms, and introduce a new vocabulary. (Author/AV)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED143576

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Pershing Vartanian

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

American Studies: A Problem in Academic Contra-Culture

Pershing Vartanian

History Department, Humanities 4210
San Diego State University
San Diego, California 92182

Pershing Vartanian is Associate Professor of History at San Diego State University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1971 and taught at Wayne State University in Detroit for two years before coming to San Diego in 1968. Until recently, he served as the American Studies Chair at San Diego. While his specialty is American Intellectual History, he has written on a number of topics: "The Cochran Thesis: A Re-examination in Statistical Methods "(JAH, 1964); "Cotton Mather and the Puritan Transition into the Enlightenment" (Early American Literature, 1972); and in keeping with recent interest, "The Voluntary American Studies Program: Strategies for Development" (forthcoming in the American Quarterly 1978 summer supplement); and a critical essay which is to appear in an anthology edited by Susan Tamke in the Journal of Popular Culture on "Popular Culture Studies: Dynamic Socio-Cultural Models." At present, Mr. Vartanian is working on an intellectual history of the American Studies movement entitled The Academic Contra Culture: An Intellectual History of the American Studies Movement.

SO010215

American Studies: A Problem in Academic Contra Culture

While the American Studies movement has only recently celebrated its fiftieth birthday, it is still devoid of any controlling assumptions, models and coherence. Many recognize this condition and attribute it to the movement's academic youth. The American Studies movement, wrote Robert Merideth in another context, "is still . . . adolescent and not completely under control. . . ."[1] But as Merideth himself concludes, "intellectual adolescence" does not ring true, a fact which American Studies scholars now recognize.

Indeed, the movement has undergone significant change in the last fifty years. Today, American culture studies is displacing the older designation American Studies, which in turn displaced the original name American Civilization. In addition, nearly a hundred programs nationally confer graduate degrees in American Studies with at least one-third granting a Ph.D. There is an active international program, and substantial sums from foundations have been devoted to the development of particular American Studies programs, Associational activity and individual scholarship. One might argue that no academic discipline has blossomed as luxuriantly in so brief a period.[2]

The intellectual disarray which has characterized the American Studies movement since it repudiated the "myth and symbol" paradigm in the 1960s has encouraged one group of scholars to probe into the causes of that disarray, state the problems which beset the movement, and recommend solutions. Their object has been to restore coherence in the movement so that it can once again assume the scholarly leadership it enjoyed in the 1950s. Included in this group are Gene Wise, Jay Mechling, Bruce Kucklich, Stanley Baylis and Cecil Tate. Because each has his own style and all are too geographically dispersed and each undertakes his activity independently, it is premature to call them a community. Nevertheless, they share a common concern, share a range of common experiences and as their scholarship attests, they possess a common outlook. Since most of them take their cue from Darendorph, they can be dubbed "reflexionists".

As a group, the "reflexive" scholars constitute a new voice within American Studies. While they admire the scholarly achievement of the "myth and symbol school", they have repudiated its homogenizing propensity. They advocate a pluralistic cultural model which embraces unity and diversity and deals with continuity and change. They seek to incorporate the social sciences into their scholarship and refine the culture concept to yield a richer understanding of the American genius. Although deeply concerned with the stagnation that besets American Studies scholarship, the reflexionists are equally concerned about curriculum.[3] As a group, they are as uncomfortable with curricular structure as they are with the way in which the interdisciplinary

idea has been construed and seek a refinement in both.[4] In sum, the reflexionists seek a vital reconstruction in theory, method and disciplinary goals in order to refashion the movement into American culture studies.

In most academic disciplines the questions raised by the reflexionists are matters that have long since been settled. They go straight to the heart of disciplinary integrity and involve the basic assumptions upon which disciplinary activity occurs. After a half century, this fact assumes great importance in understanding the reflexive position and the American Studies movement. To understand the reflexionists' seemingly belated concern about the movement's disciplinary core, one must see their activity as occurring within the context of an academic contra culture. Since this is the genius of American Studies, we must examine it before we can evaluate the reflexionists' prospects for success.

-1-

Historic and socio-psychological forces have conspired to make the American Studies movement a unique instance of an academic contra culture. This concept, while popularized by the radical left in the late sixties, originated in the academic community. J. Milton Yinger in his 1960 essay "Contra culture and Sub-culture" minted the term and provided the analytical model from which the argument here has been developed.[5] A contra culture differs from a sub-culture in several essentials. While some values of a sub-culture may conflict with the larger culture, the element of conflict is central to the contra culture; and while the sub-culture represents a

continuum with the larger culture, the contra culture is psychologically disjunctive. The personalities who compose the contra culture are defined by the theme and while the sub-culture can be analyzed without reference to the larger culture, the contra culture can only be understood by reference to the larger culture which it opposes. Thus, a contra culture is a highly charged socio-cultural entity which possesses both normative characteristics and the essential of conflict in its structure.

The contra cultural character of the American Studies movement is embodied in the rhetoric about its origins, discipline and methodology. These "myths" encompass the socio-psychological dimension of the movement so essential to understanding a contra culture. Throughout the rhetoric runs the theme of freedom from academic prohibitions and eagerness to collapse arbitrary lines and create new holes in the manner of Walt Whitman. Set against the conventional structure of academic discipline, this theme shapes the contemporary character of the American Studies movement. Let us look at each of these three inter-related myths: origins, disciplinarity and method.

While there are relatively clear historical lines for the origins of the American Studies movement, a myth exists about it that has a life of its own. In oral tradition, the movement began in the 1930s as a protest against disciplinary prescriptions on materials, methods and goals. As tradition has it, scholars in literature, history and other disciplines wished to make larger connections in the classroom and in research and resented the restrictions that their disciplines and colleagues placed upon them. As Robert E. Spiller wrote in 1960, "American Studies as a separate academic program

began as a series of rebellions in the various established disciplines."[6] Through this conception of the movement's origins, a unifying myth of origins emerges which fuels the academic contra culture and gives it a missionary vision. As one might expect, the origins of the American Studies movement have more prosaic academic grounds than are conveyed by the contra cultural myth.

Historically, the birth of American Studies paralleled and coincided with the birth of American literature. Indeed, the former is intimately related to the latter. In the decade following World War One, academicians introduced courses in American literature within the American universities while at the same time American letters were receiving international recognition.[7] While this development required a break with traditional literary models, it also nurtured two distinct approaches to American letters. On the one hand, the New Criticism fostered by John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate asked what was poetic about American poetry that led to internal analysis and universal aesthetic principles. On the other hand, Vernon L. Parrington and F. O. Matthiessen asked what was the relationship between American letters and American culture which led to the study of ideas and to culture studies.[8] Rather than a rebellion, the American Studies movement was an outgrowth of the conceptual definition and scholarly orientation toward American letters. Even so, the movement has been profoundly shaped by the myth and by its actual origins in a manner seldom recognized by its own practitioners.

The myth of origins is intimately related to a second myth involving

disciplinary structure. Though this is connected with the myth of method, it can still be delineated here with only nominal redundancy. As the German University idea took shape in America, along with it came specialization and academic rationalization around a variety of factors which collectively constituted the notion of academic discipline.[9] Each academic discipline in the traditional model possessed a number of sub-specializations, a distinct curriculum and a set of shared goals and assumptions about its assignment which embraced the discipline and the curriculum as a whole. In the 1930s, the American Studies movement broke with the German model, drew faculty from several disciplines, and built its pedagogical structure upon a multi-disciplinary apparatus drawn from the traditional disciplines now organized as departments.[10] As Tremaine McDowell expressed it, "The materials of American Studies are too extensive and too vital ever to conform to the pattern of academic departmentalism."[11] As a consequence, American Studies never fit the traditional German model and even the most casual attempt to give it a disciplinary character produced heated controversy. As a cursory view of American Studies catalog descriptions would quickly verify, this position was license for an individual to pursue ends indiscriminately and for faculty to resist all attempts to produce a coherent set of assumptions and goals in the belief that these were detrimental to the genius of the movement. As a consequence, the movement never conformed to the German model of disciplines organized as departments within colleges.

As a concept, discipline has several pejorative connotations for American Studies scholars. On the one hand, the suggested comparability to traditional disciplines is hotly denied,[12] while on the other hand

it implies prescriptive restraints in materials and methods resulting in academic rigidity and intellectual sterility. Any attempt to develop academic coherence and intellectual schools is vigorously resisted even by those participating in such a movement. In his "Defense of an 'Unscientific' Method" Leo Marx insisted that the scholarly products of the "myth and symbol" school of the 1950s involved independent scholars working without reference to each other.[13] Though this movement--which embraced Henry Nash Smith, John William Ward, Allan Tractenburg, and a half dozen others including Leo Marx--constituted a closely knit group of scholars,[14] it was consciously avoided by Marx in order to preserve the myth of freedom from disciplinary associations. Despite this, the American movement historically has been dominated by a certain type of scholarship and has consistently recruited from the ranks of literary critics and historians.

While sustaining an anti-disciplinary rhetoric, the American Studies movement has been dominated by scholars from American literature. The American Studies Association roster published first in 1957 and then in 1968 shows that even though membership doubled, nearly two-thirds came from English, less than a fifth from American history, and the remainder from a half dozen disciplines.[15] Only some five percent in 1968 were persons with American Studies degrees. A similar bias can be seen in the American Quarterly. Its subject matter is decidedly literary and its contributors are drawn primarily from English departments. Thus, despite, the rhetoric, the American Studies movement has been exploited and dominated by literatures and bears the marks of the relationship born in the 1930s and sustained for half a century. As a result, literature has shaped the movement's as-

sumptions, methods and goals in a subtle but distinct way through the myth of method.

The myth of method took shape as the movement developed its scholarly literature. While the myth embraced two distinctly contrary elements, in practice both fortified the theme of freedom within the academic contra culture. On the one hand, the application of the culture concept to American Studies[16] called for a particular methodological approach to deal with it. Henry Nash Smith legitimated this ecletic methodological posture in 1957 when he argued that there was no one method for American Studies and that the scholar would have to devise his methods as he proceeded.[17] By maintaining a pragmatic posture concerning its methods for culture study, the American Studies movement has maintained the illusion of "free space." Despite this rhetoric, the American Studies movement has implicitly implied a methodological commitment which is rarely recognized by the academic contra culture.

The American Studies movement draws extensively from the language and practices of literary historians and critics. In contrast to historians and social scientists, the literary historian imposes no structure upon his data, but more commonly uses the document as the analytical matrix for his study. Because of this, the literary historian is prone to taxonomy. This takes the form of genre studies in which the materials which form the category or genre are the object of study. Usually, those materials are selected for their aesthetic potential and thus the culture concept employed is narrowly understood to constitute the aesthetic culture of elites. All these elements are incorporated into American Studies scholarship. As a consequence, the American Studies movement has a method, a language and

goals which have been appropriated from literary history and are so imbedded in the movement as to be unrecognized.

These myths sustain the American Studies movement as an academic contra culture. In recounting its origins, avowed hostility to disciplinary models in the traditional mode and resistance to a mono-methodological approach to culture studies, it becomes evident that any attempt at disciplinary reconstruction within the movement will meet with substantial resistance. If such reconstruction is to succeed, it must be achieved with the contra culture paradigm. While the myth and symbol school provides a model for this, it is only one alternative that is presently available. Not only do the reflexive scholars within the American Studies movement recognize this, but they go beyond the myth and symbol to provide alternatives. Now, we should turn to this group once again to evaluate the prospects for reconstruction.

-2-

While the reflexive scholars propose a basic reconstruction in curriculum, methods and goals, they are deeply committed to the movement's contra cultural genius. As a group, these scholars are mindful of the movement's historic origins, but they remain hostile to a disciplinary structure. Mechling wishes to refashion the interdisciplinary idea. As he sees it, the concept has lost its utility and interdisciplinarity has become license for undisciplinary scholarship. Instead, he urges the substitution of "convergent disciplinarity" in which disciplines are applied only as they impinge upon or converge with the theme being studied.[18] From a somewhat different slant, Wise proposes a more substantive and systematic understanding of the interdisciplinary

idea. Along with Mechling, Wise is foremost among the reflexive scholars and has devoted a significant portion of his career to the problems inherent in interdisciplinary methodology. Thus, he urges a patterned approach to the relationship of hypothesis to problems, the use of discrete materials, the location of "fault lines" as the locus for analysis and a number of other postulates which can restore significance to the interdisciplinary idea, neither Mechling, Wise nor the other reflexive scholars express any desire to abandon it.[19] Because they have a commitment to the contra culture, they are reluctant to abandon the free space which interdisciplinarity affords.

Not only do the reflexive scholars retain their commitment to interdisciplinarity, but they cling to the movement's mission. Though he shares his view with Wise, Baylis and Kucklick, Mechling, who has formulated an ethic for American Studies scholars, has perhaps best articulated the missionary ideology.[20] At bottom, this is a Thoreauvian ethic of moral commitment and dissent from the conformity imposed by the traditional academic community with its orthodox culture. This ethical principle, Mechling believes, must, as the foundation of the movement, be reflected in its scholarship and pedagogy. Through it, he anticipates a unifying vision which will sustain the movement and fortify the scholar and student.

Since the reflexionists have one foot in the academic contra culture, they have only imperfectly focused upon the central problem in American Studies. To wit, they have only offered a marginal commentary on the need for disciplinary goals. Instead, like their peers, they focus upon methodological considerations and neglect any concerted attempt to articulate a comprehensive body of disciplinary goals which would differentiate

American Studies from other disciplines. They are still captive to the rhetoric that animates the movement. In part, the concern for method rather than direction is grounded in the movement's origins. Initially it was a pedagogical issue arising from the question "how to teach American Civilization?" which became a scholarly concern that now absorbs a disproportinate amount of the energy within the movement. While the reflexionists remain caught up in this rhetoric, they have nevertheless turned their attention to disciplinary goals.

In so doing, they have substituted American culture studies for either American Civilization or American Studies. The distinction is more than nominal. It is intended to remove the ambiguities inherent in the older designations and through the new nomenclature to orient the movement towards goals. While the implications of that orientation remain undeveloped, it is a starting point from which to assail the central problem in the movement's disciplinary vision. It is an assignment which the reflexionists still perceive only dimly and have addressed only marginally, because they remain firmly grounded in the movement's rhetoric. Nevertheless, this grounding constitutes an important bridge in their effort to initiate a new direction in the movement which will give it conceptual coherence.

Since the contra cultural genius within American Studies is unalterable, only those able to retain a foothold in that vision can introduce significant change. At present that prospect is in sight. The reflexionists have introduced new meanings to old ideas and have attracted wide respect within the American Studies movement. If they succeed in their goals, they shall refine the culture concept, restate the interdisciplinary idea in operational terms and introduce a new vocabulary, along with an analytical set of canons

that can be incorporated into the movement's pedagogical and curricular structure. Tentative steps have been taken. Though much remains there is much promise and it is a promise worth monitoring in the years ahead.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert Merideth, comp., American Studies; Essays on Theory and Method (Columbus: C.E. Merrill, 1968).

[2]John Higham, History (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

[3]This essay is a preliminary statement of the author's forthcoming monograph, "The Academic Contra Culture: An Intellectual History of the American Studies Movement," in preparation.

[4]Stanley Bailis, "The Social Sciences in American Studies: An Integrative Conception," American Quarterly, 26, no. 3 (August 1974): 202-224; Jay Mechling, Robert Merideth, and David Wilson, "American Culture Studies: The Discipline and the Curriculum," ibid., 25, no. 4 (October 1973): 371-389.

[5]J. Milton Yinger, "Contraculture and Subculture," American Sociological Review, 25, no. 5 (October 1960): 625-635.

[6]Robert E. Spiller, "American Studies, Past, Present and Future," in Studies in American Culture; Dominant Ideas and Images, ed. Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960), p. 207.

[7]Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return, rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1951); Richard Ruland, The Rediscovery of American Literature: Premises of Critical Taste, 1900-1940 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); William G. Crane, ed., American Literature in the College Curriculum (Chicago: National Council of Teachers of English, 1948).

[8]Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Drama' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," American Quarterly, (Summer 1979, forthcoming); Robert Sklar, "The Search for an American Studies 'Philosophy': A Bibliography of New Directions," ibid., 27, no. 3 (August 1975): 245-262.

[9]Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955): Laurence R. Veysey, The Emergence of the American University (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965).

[10]Robert F. Lucid., ed., "Programs in American Studies," American Quarterly, 22, no. 2, pt. 2 (Summer 1970): 431-596, especially the Harvard, Penn and Yale programs.

[11]Tremaine McDowell, Review of Robert Spiller's Changing Patterns in American Civilization, American Quarterly, 1, no. 3 (Fall 1949): 283.

[12]Richard Huber, "A Theory of American Studies," in Merideth, American Studies, pp. 3-14; Roy Harvey Pearce, "American Studies as a Discipline," ibid., pp. 14-26; William Randel, "English as a Discipline," ibid., pp. 26-33.

[13]Leo Marx, "American Studies: Defense of an 'Unscientific' Method," New Literary History, 1, no. 1 (October 1969): 75-90.

[14]See Wise, "'Paradigm Drama'."

[15]"Membership Directory, American Studies Association," American Quarterly, 9, no. 2 (Summer 1957): 257-276; "Membership Directory, American Studies Association," ibid., 20, no. 2, pt. 2 (Summer 1968): 504-544. This data was derived from a 10 per cent quota sample. Where an individual listed a double emphasis, a mark was ascribed to each emphasis. Although several persons might have been high school or community college teachers, no distinction was made since the American Studies Association made none.

[16]See Huber, "Theory"; Mechling, Merideth and Wilson, "American Culture Studies," passim.

[17]Henry Nash Smith, "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?," American Quarterly, 9, no. 2 (Summer 1957): 197-208; see also Marx, "American Studies."

[18]Jay Mechling, "If They Can Build a Square Tomato...Notes Toward a Holistic Approach to Regional Studies" (Paper delivered at the California Conference of American Studies, North and South, Santa Cruz, California, March 12, 1977).

[19]Gene Wise, "Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies," American Studies, (Fall 1977, forthcoming).

[20]Cecil F. Tate, The Search for a Method in American Studies (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), especially ch. VII, "American Studies as a Discipline."